

Mayor's Report – March 2016

Projects

Big Word Fest

This latest Big Event is a real treat, bringing together organisations and groups from all over the town to deliver a packed programme of events. There is a huge variety of events, covering author talks, theatre, and arts and crafts. It has been very well received and the Watford Observer and BBC Three Counties radio have been great media partners for what will hopefully be the first of many literary festivals.

Cassiobury Park

Borras Construction has been appointed to carry out the £6.6m Heritage Lottery and Big Lottery funded restoration of Cassiobury Park. Based locally in St Albans, Borras is a family-owned contractor which has worked on numerous successful park restoration projects. Work began in February, starting with the construction of an eco-friendly hub building that will become the heart of the park, and act as a central welcoming point for visitors. As well as providing improved changing facilities for the pools, sports changing rooms, a new kiosk and upper floor café, the hub will include a flexible teaching and exhibition space.

The Bandstand

The historic Cassiobury Bandstand has been taken for a revamp before being returned to its home in the park. Due to open in September in its original 1920s location, the bandstand will have a new colour scheme using the colours from the Capel family coat of arms. Work to remove the bandstand from its current location started in early March. It is being taken to the Lost Art workshop, a conservation and restoration metalwork specialist where it will receive a new soundboard, a restored roof and a lick of paint.

Watford Health Campus Projects

The Metropolitan Line Extension and Watford Health Campus projects are full steam ahead, with works gathering pace this Spring. Transport for London (TfL) is building a new viaduct over Baldwins Lane as part of the Metropolitan Line Extension (MLX). Before they can do this, the various utility companies need to divert existing gas, water, electric and communication services. This will involve some traffic management around Baldwins Lane and the A412 Watford Road.

Another important step has been reached in the creation of the Watford Health Campus with the Government approval of the scheme's CPO. In approving the Health Campus CPO, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government recognises that the Health Campus will make a significant contribution to improving

the 'economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area'. The benefits the Secretary of State notes in his decision, include the new homes that will be delivered, which will include affordable housing and the improvements to the local environment, such as cleaning up contaminated land and reducing flood risks in the area.

Investing in the Future of the Town Centre

As part of the plans for improving the town centre, the Council is proposing to widen the pavement on the western side of the High Street, between the Met Quarter and Water Lane. Officers are currently talking with affected businesses and groups to get their views and then the Council will go out to a public consultation later in the year.

Better Business for All partnership

The Hertfordshire Better Business for All (BBfA) partnership, of which Watford is one of the leaders, was shortlisted for two BBfA awards. Herts was the only partnership up for two awards and we came runners-up for our Regulators Training Programme initiative. From a field of 26, we also took third place in the Partnership of the Year category. A number of the shortlisted partnerships, including some of the winners, referenced Hertfordshire's partnership for helping them on their journey by sharing our products and advice. This goes to show what great partnership working is happening in the Council.

Spring Clean

To welcome in the Spring, the Council launched a two-week town-wide spring clean on 4 March. The start of the spring clean coincided with the national Clean for the Queen campaign (4-6 March) and the Council is aiming to have the highest number of clean-up activities of any town in the UK. Our partners at Veolia, who do a wonderful job of cleaning the town, are providing clean-up kits – including litter-pickers and special purple bin-bags.

The Regeneration of Ascot Road

The Council has signed a new 250 year lease with regeneration specialist Orion Land and Leisure for their site by Ascot Road, West Watford. Works will soon begin on site to de-contaminate it, after which time, Orion is hoping to put on some pop-up events and activities. The planning process is expected to take up to two years. Residents should look out for the planning application in the autumn of this year. Completion of the new development is hoped to be in line with the opening of the new Cassiobridge tube station in 2020.

Partnership Working

I had my regular catch up meeting with Chief Inspector Wheatley and following these discussions there was a presentation to One Watford which showed interesting variations in crime in the town. In particular with regard to the night time economy for which there is good news. The presentation also highlighted the emergence of different kinds of issues clearly showing our population is changing and that crime patterns are also changing.

AstroTurf for Meriden

Watford FC's Community Sports and Education Trust is starting a refurbishment of Meriden Community Centre with the installation of a third generation artificial grass pitch by early May. Replacing the weathered multi-use games area, the pitch will make better use of the space, be easier to look after and can be used in any weather. The project is being partly funded by Watford Borough Council

Crime Stoppers Campaign

I was invited to the "Crime Stoppers Hard to Reach Campaign Hertfordshire" at the Asda Shopping Centre in North Watford along with the Police and Crime Commissioner. This campaign was launched with a 7 day tour of a Crimestoppers ad-van, using multi-lingual Crimestoppers messages.

Supporting Local Organisations

British Polio Fellowship

I was delighted to visit the British Polio Fellowship's new premises in Watford which was officially opened by her Royal Highness the Duchess of Gloucester. The Royal visit was a wonderful way to mark a new Central Office and a new Chapter in the 77 years of the British Polio Foundation.

Herts Fire and Rescue

I recently enjoyed attending a Passing Out Parade of the Watford Local Intervention Fire Education (LIFE) Course. This is a 5 day intensive workshop delivered by specially trained fire-fighters on a monthly basis at a designated local Community Fire Station within Hertfordshire. The LIFE project is a Youth Intervention Programme run by Herts Fire and Rescue to install discipline and respect into Young People's lives.

Watford Half Marathon

It was a pleasure to present the Awards to the winners of the Watford Half Marathon in Cassiobury Park. It was really inspiring to see such a great turnout and the enthusiasm of all the runners.

Business News

Intu Centre extension

The demolition phase of the £150 million Charter Place redevelopment is nearly finished and soon the construction of the new shopping centre will get underway.

The plans will see the redeveloped Charter Place Shopping Centre integrated with the existing Intu shopping centre, to establish new public realms for entertainment and events, large modern retail units, a restaurant hub and cinema.

Intu also intends to refurbish the existing centre, so the end result will be a single, modern, vibrant 1.4million sq ft destination.

Once the work is complete in 2018, property research consultancy CACI estimates that Watford will be part of its top 20 ranking for national retail destinations, alongside Edinburgh and Bristol.

Debenhams to be Anchor Store

I am delighted to say that Debenhams has signed up to take a unit in the extension of the Intu Centre. The addition of Debenhams will significantly increase the appeal of Watford as a shopping destination. Debenhams joins other confirmed occupants: Cineworld with its nine-screen IMAX cinema and restaurants.

Wilkinsons

I was really pleased to be opening the New Wilkos Store in February. The store was clearly missed during its move from Charter Place and subsequent refurbishment, as there was a great queue of people waiting to flood through the doors as soon as they were open again!

Car park refurbishments

The refurbishment of Church, Gade and Sutton car parks by CitiPark is almost complete and many people are looking forward to accessing the best car parks in Watford.

CitiPark are finalising the much needed upgrade, not only aesthetically but with improved CCTV and industry-leading technology such as Automatic Number Plate

Recognition (ANPR) and a brand new parking management system, altogether allowing for a quicker, easier and more secure parking experience.

All three of the CitiPark car parks in Watford are currently open 24/7 with the final touches close to completion.

Food Hygiene in town centre

Nearly 80% of food and drinks outlets in Watford have received top scores for hygiene. Recent statistics showed that 60.3% of Watford's food and drinks venues are rated 'very good' scoring 5 out of 5 with a further 18.6% scoring 4 and being rated 'good'.

Engaging the Community

Doctor's Strikes

I went along to meet the people on the picket line for the recent Doctor's strikes. I felt it was important to hear their concerns and issues at first hand. It is very disappointing that this situation still remains unresolved.

Meeting with Under Secretary of State

I met recently with Ben Gummer MP, Under Secretary of State for Care Quality. I was very concerned about the fact that Watford General Hospital has been in a difficult situation for several years. I discussed with him the progress of the Trust getting out of Special Measures. I felt it was important to have the Government's take on the state of our Trust and its prospects for improvement. I am pleased to say that the meeting was positive. I also outlined with him, the plans to assist the Hospital with its regeneration and improvement of facilities.

Bookshop

I've had many residents contact me regarding their concern that we have lacked a real Bookshop in the Town since 2012. I completely agree with them and I have therefore written to Waterstones and Amazon to ask them to consider bringing a store to Watford. I very much hope for a positive response.

TfL Zoning for stations in Watford

There is huge frustration among commuters regarding the peculiar zoning which makes Watford stations more expensive to travel to central London than from similar stations in other areas. I have therefore written to Transport for London to ask that there is a review of the anomaly that placed Watford Junction outside the normal zones 1-9 and I await a response.

Children's Mental Health Week

It was Children's Mental Health week 1 – 14 February and I was really pleased to be invited to visit Laurence Haines School who have embarked on a two year national Nurturing In Schools programme, the first school in Hertfordshire to do so. This programme embeds emotional well-being at the heart of the school community, which I fully support.

International Women's Day

We celebrated International Women's Day on 8 March and I joined in the activities at Watford Central Library hosted by Watford Women's Centre. We celebrated the "WOW" (Women of Watford) factor, whilst recognising there is a long way to go. The event was supported by many organisations in the town including Watford Women's Refuge, Watford and Three Rivers Refugee Project and the Police

Watford Sheltered Workshop

I was invited to join the Watford Sheltered Workshop as their Patron when they had a visit from the Minister for Disabled People. It's good that this enterprise still continues in Watford when many across the country have closed down.

Council News

Museum Rosette

Watford Museum has been awarded the accreditation of VisitEngland's Quality Assured Visitor Attraction. The assessment recognised the wealth of interesting items featured in the Museum along with the building's façade, painted railings and exceptionally well maintained garden, which all combine to create a great first impression and experience for visitors.

Skateboarding

Watford Borough Council has imported £4,500 worth of specialist skateboarding ramps from the USA for people to use during the free Friday night Skates and Ladders sessions at Watford YMCA. The sessions run from 7.30pm to 9pm and are provided through the Council's Get Active programme to improve health and fitness levels in Central Watford.

We have also begun consultation on a potential new up to date skate park existing alongside a new BMX track and improved cycling facilities. Early days yet but an exciting new community facility for young people and families, subject to consultation of course.